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Main

Ancient

Medieval

Modern

LGBT Sections

Intro and Theory

Ancient

Mediterranean

Medieval

Europe to WWI

Europe Since WWI

North America

Asia, Africa, Lat
America, Oceania

Special

Bibliographies

John Boswell's Works

Links

Gay Icons

FAQ

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Help Page

IHSP Credits

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Gunnora Hallakarva: The Vikings and Homosexuality

Gunnora Hallakarva runs the [Viking Answer Lady Page](#), a collection of essays on all sorts of aspects of Viking culture. She wrote this piece, which is a splendid summary of 1990s discussion on Viking homosexuality, and gave permission for its inclusion at the People With a History site.

DEAR VIKING ANSWER LADY How did the Vikings regard and treat male and female homosexuals? I am considering adding a blue feather to my Viking garb, but I wonder how this will affect my persona?

(signed) They Call me Strange Oddi

GENTLE READER,

My personal research into homosexuality in the Viking Age shows clearly that the Vikings had words (and therefore mental constructs and concepts) of same-sex activity; however since the needs of agricultural/pastoral living require reproduction not only to work the farm but also to provide support for the parent in old age, it was expected that no matter what one's affectional preferences were that each individual would marry and reproduce. There are no recorded instances of homosexual or lesbian couples in the Viking Age; moreover, the idea of living as an exclusively homosexual person did not exist in most cultures until present day Western civilization appeared. One's sexual partners mattered little so long as one married, had children, and conformed at least on the surface to societal norms so as not to disturb the community. Those Scandinavians who attempted to avoid marriage because of their sexuality were penalized in law: a man who shunned marriage was termed *fuðflogi* (man who flees the female sex organ) while a woman who tried to avoid marriage was *flannfluga* (she who flees the male sex organ) (Jochens 65). The evidence of the sagas and laws shows that male homosexuality was regarded in two lights: there was nothing at all strange or shameful about a man having intercourse with another man if he was in the

active or "manly" role, however the passive partner in homosexual intercourse was regarded with derision. It must be remembered, however, that the laws and sagas reflect the Christian consciousness of the Icelander or Norwegian of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, well after the pagan period. The myths and legends show that honored gods and heroes were believed to have taken part in homosexual acts, which may indicate that pre-Christian Viking Scandinavia was more tolerant of homosexuality, and history is altogether silent as to the practice of lesbianism in the Viking Age.

OLD NORSE TERMINOLOGY REGARDING HOMOSEXUALITY AND RELATED CONCEPTS

The Old Norse word used in the law code and literature for an insult was níð , which may be defined as "libel, insult, scorn, lawlessness, cowardice, sexual perversion, homosexuality" (Markey 75). From níð are derived such words as níðvisur ("insulting verses"), níðskald ("insult-poet"), níðingr ("coward, outlaw"), griðníðingr ("truce-breaker"), níðstöng ("scorn-pole") (Markey 75, 79 & 80; Sørensen 29), also níða ("to perform níð poetry"), tunguníð ("verbal níð"), tréníð ("timber níð", carved or sculpted representations of men involved in a homosexual act, related to níðstöng, above) (Sørensen 28-29). Níð was part of a family of concepts which all have connotations of passive male homosexuality, such as: ergi or regi (nouns) and argr or ragr (the adjective form of ergi) ("willing or inclined to play or interested in playing the female part in sexual relations with another man, unmanly, effeminate, cowardly"); ergjask ("to become argr"); rassragr ("arse-ragr"); stroðinn and sorðinn ("sexually used by a man") and sansorðinn ("demonstrably sexually used by another man") (Sørensen 17-18, 80). A man who is a seiðmaðr (one who practices women's magic) who is argr is called seiðskratti (Sørensen 63).

ATTITUDES ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY INTRODUCED BY CHRISTIANITY

The secular laws of Viking Age Iceland do not mention homosexuality. The only place where homosexuality is documentably prohibited is by the Christian Church. The Icelandic Homily Book (ca. 1200 C.E.) has a sermon which states that among grave sins are "those appalling secret sins perpetrated by men who respect men no more than women, or violate quadrupeds." Bishop Þorlákur Þórhallson of Skáholt's Penitential (ca. 1178-1193 C.E.) lists penances of nine or ten years that include flogging for "adultery between males, or that committed by men on quadrupeds," and says of lesbianism that "if women satisfy each other they shall be ordered the same penance as men who perform the most hideous adultery between them or with a quadruped." (Sørensen 26) Christian belief condemns both the active and passive roles of homosexual intercourse, whereas the pagan Scandinavians attached disapproval only to the male who was homosexually passive.

VIKING ATTITUDES ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY AND MANLINESS

Homosexuality was not regarded by the Viking peoples as being evil, perverted, innately against the laws of nature or any of the other baggage about the concept that Christian belief has provided Western culture. Rather, it was felt that a man who subjected himself to another in sexual affairs would do the same in other areas, being a follower rather than a leader, and allowing others to do his thinking or fighting for him. Thus, homosexual sex was not what was condemned, but rather the failure to stand for one's self

and make one's own decisions, to fight one's own fights, which went directly against the Nordic ethic of self-reliance. (Sørensen 20). Being used homosexually by another man was equated with cowardice because of the custom of sexual aggression against vanquished foes. This practice is documented in Sturlunga saga, most notably in Guðmundar saga dýra where Guðmundr takes captive a man and his wife, and plans for both the woman and the man to be raped as a means of sexual humiliation (Ok var þat við orð at leggja Þórunni í rekkju hjá einhverjum gárungi, en gera þat vi Björn prest, at þat þaelig;tti eigi minni svívirðing.) (Sørensen 82, 111; Sturlunga saga, I, 201). In addition to rape, defeated enemies were frequently castrated, again testified to in several places by Sturlunga saga. Grágás records that a klámhogg or "shame-stroke" on the buttocks was, along with castration, a "major wound" (hin meiri sár), ranked with wounds that penetrated the brain, abdomen, or marrow: the klámhogg was thus equated with castration as "unmanning" the victim, and classed with wounds that cause major penetrations of the body, strongly suggesting that the term refers to rape or forced anal sex such as was inflicted on a defeated combatant (Sørensen 68). It is not known how widespread the practice of raping defeated foes actually was, or if it existed before the advent of Christianity, but in other cultures which have had as strong an ethic of masculine aggression as existed among the Vikings, the rape of defeated foemen was obligatory. The attitude that homosexual usage of an enemy was a means of humiliation in turn would have weighed heavily against men in homosexual relationships: if it was a shameful humiliation of an enemy, performing intercourse with a beloved friend would have been regarded as a the worst sort of betrayal or lack of loyalty (Sørensen 28). Since all the references in literature and especially insults indicate that to be sansorðinn, ragr, níðingr or to be accused of ergi is to be a man who is the passive recipient of anal sex, we do not know if the Vikings regarded oral sex between men unfavorably or not (or, in fact, how they regarded oral sex in general, no matter who, male or female, was doing it, or to whom, male or female, it was being done). It is interesting to note that the Vikings considered that old age caused a man to become argr. A well-known proverb stated svá ergisk hverr sem eldisk, "everyone gets argr as he gets older." This possibly could point to an increasing acceptance of homosexuality after a man had raised a family and grew older (Sørensen 20), although a man such as the chieftain Snorri goði who fathered 22 children, the last at the age of 77 (just before he died), certainly proves that a man never was really too old to father children! (Jochens 81). For a man who could not have children (whether due to impotence, sterility, age, etc.) homosexual relations may have been acceptable. One slang term for such a man seems to have been kottrinn inn blauði, or "soft cat" as reported in Stúfs þaacute;tt, an epilogue to Laxdæla saga, in a conversation between the Norwegian king Haraldr harðráði and Stúfr, the son of Þórðr kottr (Þórðr the Cat): puzzled by the unusual nickname, Haraldr asks Stúfr whether his father Þórðr was kottrinn inn hvati eða inn blauði, "the hard or the soft cat." Stúfr declines to answer despite the implied insult, but the king admits that his question was foolish because "the person who is soft (blauðr) could not be a father" (Jochens 76).

INSULTS ALLEGING HOMOSEXUALITY

There is ample documentation of homosexuality in insults. Judging by the literature, the Vikings were the "rednecks" of medieval Europe... if you went into the mead hall and called a man a faggot, he'd do the same thing that any

good ol' boy at a Texas cowboy bar would do. The end result would be a big axe in your head instead of a big cowboy boot in your face, but the idea is the same. Furthermore, in every one of the instances where níð or ergi is encountered as an accusation, no one seriously believes that the accused party is in fact homosexual: the charge is symbolic, rather like calling a modern redneck "queer" to provoke him to fight. (Sørensen 20) Because, then as now, some sorts of insults were "fightin' words" or even killing words, Scandinavian law codes made certain types of insults illegal, and either condoned the victim's slaying of the slanderer or penalized the utterance of insults with outlawry. The Gulaping Law of Norway (ca. 100-1200 C.E.) Says: Um fullrettes orð. Orð ero þau er fullrettis orð heita. Þat er eitt ef maðr kveðr at karlmanne oðrom at hann have barn boret. Þat er annat ef maðr kyeðr hann væra sannsorðenn. Þat er hit þriðia ef hann iamnar hanom við meri æða kallar hann grey æða portkono æða iamnar hanom við berende eitthvert. Concerning terms of abuse or insult. There are words which are considered terms of abuse. Item one: if a man say of another man that he has borne a child. Item two: if a man say of another man that he has been homosexually used. Item three: if a man compare another man to a mare, or call him a bitch or a harlot, or compare him to any animal which bears young (Markey, 76, 83) Similarly, the Icelandic law code Grágás (ca. 1100-1200 C.E.) has: Þav ero orð riú ef sva mioc versna máls endar manna er scog gang vaðla avll. Ef maðr kallar man ragan eða stroðinn eða sorðinn. Oc scal sokia sem avnnor full rettis orð enda a maðr vigt igegn þeim orðum þrimr. Then there are three terms which occasion bringing such a serious suit against a man that they are worthy to outlaw him. If a man call a man unmanly [effeminate], or homosexual, or demonstrably homosexually used by another man, he shall proceed to prosecute as with other terms of abuse, and indeed a man has the right to avenge with combat for these terms of abuse (Markey, 76, 83). The Frostaping Law likewise tells us that it is fullréttisorð (verbal offenses for which full compensation or fines must be paid to the injured party) to compare a man to a dog, or to call him sannsorðinn (demonstrably homosexually used by another man), but goes on to penalize as hálfréttisorð (requiring one-half compensation) terms which in our culture would almost be considered complementary, including comparing a man with a bull, a stallion, or other male animal (Sørensen 16). Many exchanges of insults are to be found in the Poetic Edda, particularly in Hárbarðljóð, a man-matching between Óðinn and Thórr; Lokasenna, in which Loki insults the Norse gods; Helgakviða Hundingsbana in the exchange of deadly insults between Sinfjotli and Guðmundr; Helgakviða Hjórvarðssonar in the exchange of threats between Atli and the giantess Hrimgerð. Other instances may be found in the sagas such as Egils saga skallagrímssonar and Vatnsdæla saga. Insults directed at men come in several varieties. Taunts might sneer at a man's poverty, as Óðinn does when he tells Thórr that he is "but a barefoot beggar with his buttocks shining through his breeches" (Hárbarðljóð 6), or declare a man to be a cuckold (Hárbarðljóð 48, Lokasenna 40). Some insults were scatological: Þegi þuacute; Niorðr! þuacute; vart austr heðan gíls um sendr at goðom; Hymis meyar hofðo þic at hlandtrogi oc þeacute; í munn migo. Be thou silent, Njorðr! you were sent eastward to the gods as a hostage; Hymir's maidens used you as a piss-trough and they pissed in your mouth. (Lokasenna 34) Insults of this nature seem to have been merely rude or disgusting. More serious were those which were mentioned in the laws, concerning cowardice or unmanly behavior. Cowardice was perhaps the lesser of the two types of insults, although the categories blur: Enough

strength hath Thórr, but a stout heart nowise: in fainthearted fear wast fooled in a mitten, nor seemed then Thórr himself: in utter dread thou didst not dare to fart or sneeze, lest Fjalar heard it. (Hárbarðljóð 26) Other insults alleging craven behavior may be found in Hárbarðljóð 27 and 51, as well as Lokasenna 13 and 15. More dangerous still were insults that called a man "gelding," implying cowardice as well as touching on the connotations of sexual perversity connected with the horse, as in the insult where Hrimgerð calls Atli "a gelding who is a coward, whinnying loudly like a stallion but with his heart in his hinder part" (Helgakviða Hjorvarpssonar 20). The very deadliest of insults were those which attributed effeminate behavior or sexual perversion to the victim. Accusations of seiðr, women's magic or witchcraft, implied that the practitioner played the woman's part in the sexual act (Sturluson, Prose Edda, 66-68). Óðinn, a practitioner of seiðr, was often taunted with the fact, although this insult is found in other contexts as well (Lokasenna 24, Helgakviða Hundingsbana 38). Similarly, an insult might call a man a mare, either directly or via a kenning such as "Grani's bride" – Grani being the famous stallion belonging to Sigfried the Dragonslayer (Helgakviða Hundingsbana 42). Loki's shapeshifting into the form of a mare may have resulted in the best of horses, Óðinn's mount Sleipnir, but the implication of (at best) bisexuality was an inescapable slur on Loki's reputation ever after (Markey, 79). As the Gulaping Law states, it was equally insulting to liken a man to any creature that bears young. One of the more comprehensive insults of this class is to be found in Helgakviða Hundingsbana: A witch wast thou on Varin's Isle, didst fashion falsehoods and fawn on me, hag: to no wight would'st thou be wed to but me, to no sword-wielding swain but to Sinfjotli. Thou wast, witch hag, a valkyrie fierce in Allfather's hall, hateful and grim: all Valhöll's warriors had well-nigh battled, willful woman, to win thy hand. On Saga Ness full nine wolves we had together – I gat them all. (Helgakviða Hundingsbana 38-39) This was directed at Guðmundr Granmatsson, one of King Helgi's captains and a formidable warrior! In pagan Scandinavia, a ritual form of insult was also practiced at times, the erection of a níðstöng or scorn-pole. This ritual had five basic elements: (1) an overt or covert association of ergi [effeminate behavior]; (2) implementation of an animal, usually female [i.e., a mare], as a totemic device whereby lack of masculinity is implied; (3) an animal's body or head is mounted on a pole and turned toward the dwelling place of the person towards whom the níð is directed; (4) formulaic verse, often inscribed in runes on the pole supporting the totemic device; (5) appellant incantations to the gods or spirits to confer magical power on the totemic device and/or carry out the desires of the níðskald (Markey 77-78). Mention of this ritual is made in Book V of Saxo Grammaticus' Gesta Danorum and in chapter 33 or Vatnsdæla saga, but the most complete description is given in Egils saga skallagrímssonar: Egil went ashore onto the island, picked up a branch of hazel and then went to a certain cliff that faced the mainland. Then he took a horse head, set it up on the pole and spoke these formal words: "Here I set up a pole of insult against King Eirik and Queen Gunnhild." Then, turning the horsehead towards the mainland: "And I direct this insult against the guardian spirits of this land, so that every one of them shall go astray, neither to figure nor to find their dwelling places until they have driven King Eirik and Queen Gunnhild from this country." Next, he jammed the pole into a cleft in the rock and left it standing there with the horsehead facing towards the mainland, and cut runes on the pole declaiming the words of his formal

LESBIANS IN VIKING SCANDINAVIA

There is little mention in the sources regarding lesbianism in the Viking Age. When the feminine form of the word *argr*, (*org*), is used about a woman, it does not indicate that she is homosexual, but rather lecherous or immodest. (Sørensen 18). *Staðarhólsbók*, one of the existing versions of *Grágás*, prohibits a woman from wearing male clothing, from cutting her hair like a man, bearing arms, or in general behaving like a man (chs 155 and 254), however it does not mention behaving sexually in the male role. After the onset of Christianity, of course, lovemaking between women was condemned by the Church as mentioned above. During the Viking Age, however, women were in short supply, at least in Iceland. Exposure of infants (*barnaútburðr*) was a Viking Age practice, and female infants were preferentially exposed, leaving fewer women (Jochens 86). This meant that every woman who survived to reproductive age was going to be married to at least one man in her lifetime and would bear his children unless she were barren. This gave women quite a lot of their apparent power as reflected in the sagas, as a woman could control her husband quite well by threatening divorce (Clover 182). However, men also could have concubines so long as these were lower class (*thrall*) women (Karras). In many societies when there are several women living in a household who are all sexually tied to a single man, especially when the woman had no say in the arrangement of marriage or concubinage, then lesbian relationships could and did exist. There is good reason to see an almost "harem" atmosphere prevailing among the Vikings... the women tended to gather in the *kvenna hús* (women's quarters) (Jochens 80), or in the *dyngja* (weaving room) where a man could not go without accruing shame for unmanly interests excepting only truly mighty —i.e., virile— heroes. *Helgi Hundingsbana* was able to hide disguised as a maid in the *kvenna hús*, but for any lesser man such an act would have been regarded as cowardice, and the man who braved the *dyngja* would have been labeled as *níðingr* and *ragrmann* simply because the location was so strongly associated with women's activity and central role in the society as weavers (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II 1-5). In most societies where polygamy is common and women are denied sexual outlets other than their husband, there is frequently lesbian activity to fill not only sexual but also emotional needs. If a husband had objected to his wife having a lesbian relationship, there would have been little he could have done about it, as she could always divorce him if he complained. This gave women, lesbians or not, quite a bit of power due to the relative scarcity of marriagable women, so long as they fulfilled their societal roles as wives and mothers.

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE GODS, PRIESTS, AND HEROES

Another aspect to the question of homosexuality is the fact that certain of the gods, heroes and highly respected priests of the gods, apparently indulged in homosexual, "unmanly" or "questionable" practices. *Loki*, of course, is clearly bisexual as he certainly took the female role sexually at least during the encounter with the giant's stallion in *Gylfaginning*, which says that "*Loki* had had such dealings with *Svaðilfari* (the stallion) that sometime later he bore a foal," the most wonderful of all horses, *Óðinn's* eight-legged steed *Sleipnir* (*Sturluson, Prose Edda*, 68). *Óðinn* himself, the

Allfather and King of the Gods, was justly accused of *ergi* or unmanliness because of his practice of *seiðr* or women's magic, as learned from the goddess Freyja. We are not certain what it is about *seiðr* that made it "unmanly" for a man to practice the art: it could be anything from the idea of cowardice as a result of being able to harm your enemies through magic rather than in open battle, to overt sexual rituals involving the *seiðr*-practitioner as the passive sexual partner, or even as the passive homosexual partner. Ynglingasaga explains: *Oðinn kunni þa íþrótt, er mestr máttur fylgði, ok framði siálfr, er seiðr heitr, en af því mátti hannvita orlog manna ok óorðna hluti, suá ok at gera monnum bana eða óhamingiu eða vanheilendi, suá ok at taka frá monnum vit eða afl ok geta oðrum. En þessi fiolkyngi, er framið er, fylgir suá mikil ergi, at eigi þoacute;tti karlmonnum skammlaust við at fara, ok var gyðium kend sú íþrótt. Óðinn had the skill which gives great power and which he practiced himself. It is called seiðr, and by means of it he could know the fate of men and predict events that had not yet come to pass; and by it he could also inflict death or misfortunes or sickness, or also deprive people of their wits or strength, and give them to others. But this sorcery is attended by such great ergi that men considered it shameful to practice it, and so it was taught to priestesses (Ynglingasaga 7). Apparently homosexuals had a role within the worship of the Vanic gods. The Christian chronicler Saxo Grammaticus scornfully reported in his *Gesta Danorum* that some priests of Freyr used "effeminate gestures and the clapping of the mimes on stage and . . . the unmanly clatter of the bells." Dumézil sees evidence for a group of priests of Njörðr and Freyr who were honored, yet seem to have engaged in acts of *argr*, and who may have worn their hair in styles reserved normally only for women or even dressed themselves as women (Dumézil 115). One might assume that the morals expected of gods cannot necessarily be applied for humans. However, there were likewise a number of heroes known to have been guilty of *ergi* such as Helgi Hundingsbana (see above). Another famous *ragr* hero is the famous Icelandic hero Grettir, who in the poem *Grettisfærsla* is said to have had sexual intercourse with "maidens and widows, everyone's wives, farmers' sons, deans and courtiers, abbots and abbesses, cows and calves, indeed with near all living creatures," (Sørensen 18) yet no one attached opprobrium to Grettir because of his vast, and omnisexual, prowess. The God Freyr*

GAY PROSTITUTION

Other evidences of the acceptance of homosexuality in some circumstances at least is provided by the fact that apparently there were some men who acted as homosexual concubines or prostitutes. *Olkofra þoacute;ttr*, a short tale preserved in the manuscript *Moðruvallabók* (ca. mid 14th century C.E.) preserves the term *argaskattr*, which has the sense of "a fixed rate or other payment made to an *argr* man for his sexual performance" and further indicates that the worth of such a payment was very low indeed. (Sørensen, 34-35). It would be logical to conclude that, like other concubines, these men selling sex to other men would have been of the lowest social class, thralls (Karras).

SAME-SEX COUPLES IN ART

A provoking bit of information is provided in the art-historical evidence as well. There exist a good number of small gold foil plaques known as *goldgubber* which depict a couple embracing. Frequently these are assumed

to be Freyr, god of fertility, and Gerð, the beautiful giant maiden, and many commentators such as Hilda Ellis-Davidson believe that they may have been used at weddings. (Ellis-Davidson, *Myths and Symbols*, pp. 31-31 and p. 121). However, if one looks closely, at least two of the surviving goldgubber depict same sex couples embracing, one two bearded figures, another two women with the typical long, knotted hair, large breasts, and trailing dresses! Since these plaques in general are associated with weddings and sexual union, it is tempting to assume that these two same sex examples represent and/or commemorate homosexual relationships. Of course, the plaques in question could simply depict two friends embracing. Another possible explanation is that, in many cultures, people do not dance with the opposite sex, only with members of their own gender, and that therefore these figures may be representations of dancers.

CONCLUSION

Overall, it is most important to realize that our written records of the Viking Age typically date from 200 to 300 years AFTER the events described. If you ask a room full of Americans to describe for you, in detail, the life of George Washington, you will be able to elicit no more than a handful of "facts," most of which will be demonstrably false... and we have classes and are forced to study Washington! This does not bode well for the accuracy of the saga accounts in regards to ancient practice. Accounts written in 1200-1300 were also written by Christian men, using the Christian technology of writing, and whose worldview would have roundly condemned homosexuality. Homosexuality did not have a good reputation during the Viking age as portrayed by the Christian writers. If homosexuals enjoyed a better reputation earlier than these accounts, we have no record of it, as the "golden age" of the culture probably occurred between 600 and 800, before the actual start of the Viking Age proper, and is unrecorded except dimly through legends.

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